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ABSTRACT

Independent study involves those activities that help students develop the capacity for self-paced, lifelong learning. Independent study may be pursued concurrently with regular courses or as an intensive experience by itself. A major question faced by all who consider offering independent study concerns the students. Few institutions offer independent study without screening students on the basis of college grades. The transfer of independent study credit is often more difficult than is the transfer of traditional credit because most institutions hesitate to recognize independent study that occurs outside their own scrutiny. Ideally, the independent study project should be a student's idea that has been refined and formulated by the student and the faculty advisor. Evaluation should involve a review of the study's objectives, which may be fulfilled by writing papers, making objects, or presenting live performances. The costs of independent study to students should depend on the university resources required by the program. Since most professional jobs require problemsolving and independent throught, both enhanced by independent study, universities have an obligation to organize independent study opportunities for their students. (Author/PG)

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INDEPENDENT STUDY IN THE UNDERGRADUATE COLLEGE

Paper read at the Cornell University - New York Hospital School of Nursing Faculty Forum on Independent Study, December 3, 1973

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The term "independent study" has several interpretations. Applicants for college admission understand it as an indicator of flexibility in educational philosophy; enrolled students see it as a desirable step toward relevance and away from the boredom of diced history and sociology; administrators hope it is a panacea for unrest and demands for curricula reform; and faculty think it is a fine idea for honors students, but not for others. There are variations to these views, of course, but these are the popular perceptions. Because this is so, it makes sense for us to define what we mean.

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In an important resource, Dressel and Thompson extend the definition of independent study from the narrow confines of honors students to the realm of everyman, because they believe that the capacities developed by independent study should be among the goals of liberal education. To paraphrase these authors, independent study involves those activities which help students develop the capacity for self-paced, lifelong learning.[1]

This definition places independent study squarely into the arena of "non-traditional" study, in which students are freed from the limitations of pace, place, and traditions in higher education. As a result of this relief, non-traditional study involves new roles and tensions for both teachers and learners. It also raises again the issue of content versus process in education.

Traditional courses are offered in concurrent fashion, several at a time, and students take from three to five together, depending upon the length of the school's term. The opposite kind of course has been called "intensive" because students engage it exclusively, with no other courses as distractions. Intensive courses last from a few weeks to four months, although four to six weeks appears to be the typical length.

Independent study may be pursued in either mode, concurrently with regular courses or as an intensive experience by itself. As part of a regular course schedule, independent study often suffers from a lack of attention and succumbs to the pressures of regular courses. However, the benefits of independent study are sufficiently desirable that new time

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schedules have been proposed to accommodate it. While only a few schools have adopted a modular calendar of short, intensive, one course "terms," as at Colorado College, which has nine three and one-half week time blocks as terms, more than three hundred colleges have introduced "four-one-four," interim term calendars that include a one-month, one subject, independent study period in January. This calendar has grown dramatically in popularity during the past few years, from 230 campuses in 1970 to 329 in 1972.[2] A few colleges have instituted a similar program in May, but January is the much more popular time.

In a recent paper, Hefferlin reviewed both intensive and concurrent courses and concluded that while no evidence appears to show that concurrent courses are more effective than intensive ones, concurrent courses are employed more often because they make prescribed curricula more tolerable by breaking up students' studies into short doses.[3] Second, concurrent courses are less trouble to teach because they require less attention, and are more easily made routine. A third reason may be simply the lack of experience of most teachers with other than concurrent schedules. If teachers do not have experience with intensive courses, concurrent classes may be considered best as the result of blind repetition rather than from research and studied replication.

Hefferlin underscores the advantages of intensive courses and their role as a model of the curriculum in the future; and Dressel and Thompson cite the ability to study alone -- the goal of independent study -- as the goal of education for all students. What, then, is the status of independent study? What is its history? Although interim terms or "Jan" plans are new, the features of independent study have been available since the last part

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of the 19th century in correspondence study and tutorials. In the 1920's and 1930's, several well-known experiments blossomed at Smith, Swarthmore, Stanford, and Reed, the University of Chicago, and the University of Buffalo.[3] The percentage of institutions offering independent study increased from 16 to 25 percent between the 1930's and the 1950's;[4] and by spring 1973, about 87 percent of all four-year colleges and universities offered independent study and/or research at the undergraduate level.[5] Mayhew concludes his summary of this history by arguing that an institution should not attempt a major program of independent study as an isolated reform; the proper context is required.[6] But the rapid growth of this alternative suggests that independent study may have been adopted by many schools in response to student demands for relevance and freedom rather than as part of a coherent educational philosophy.

Before we discuss some of the major issues related to intensive independent study, we should mention the types of projects and schools where this mode of study seems to prosper. Dressel and Thompson found that research projects, independent reading, and independent laboratory experience are the most frequent types of independent study. Other researchers add work experience in industry, academic-based field study, and community service projects. Important findings hold that small private colleges are more likely to offer opportunities for independent study than large public universities, and that it is most likely to prosper in intense intellectual atmospheres.[7-11]

With this general context in mind, let us look at some of the specific issues and problems associated with any academic endeavor, and how they appear in relation to independent study. What are the roles and attitudes of faculty, administration, students? What about credit and grading,

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standards, attrition, and costs? Which courses and topics of study should be pursued? What are the benefits of independent study?

The studies cited earlier found that faculty generally view independent study as an "extra burden," i.e. an activity for which they are not rewarded in pay or credit toward promotion. A popular view among teachers is that most students are not capable of handling the independence required by self-paced study. Some faculty feel that lecture-recitation courses are more rigorous, that process should always be secondary to content, and that independent study projects are too often "unacademic."[12] One consequence of these feelings is that as independent study programs become better organized, they tend to become part of the regular course-credit structure and lose their original flexibility.[13] This phenomenon has occurred throughout the history of independent study: the structure and rules set up to insure flexibility begin to limit it; January plans are not immune to this process. Mayhew reviewed a number of them and reported as follows:

> The first year each student is allowed to work on discrete subjects. The next year students are grouped according to interests. The third year a limited number of projects are announced in advance by the faculty and in the fourth year a catalog of 'independent study courses offered during the interim term' is published, and education has returned full cycle again.[14]

Administrative time is needed to help set up independent study opportunities. Publications, finances, off-campus arrangements, etc. take time and commitment, and the attitude of the college is made evident by these efforts. The amount of assistance offered to help students prepare projects and the forms required are other expressions of college attitude. Shiny catalog rhetoric tarnishes quickly when put up against three-page applications requiring three signatures and two letters of recommendation.

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A major question faced by all who consider offering independent study concerns the students. Should all students be eligible, or only the superior ones? Obviously the answers depend upon one's goals. According to the Dressel-Thompson study, few institutions offer independent study without screening students on the basis of college grades. However, the authors urge that all students should be eligible, and other reports claim that independent study programs are being expanded to include more than honors students.[15] At two kinds of schools, the numbers involved in independent study exceed expectations: small colleges with highly intellectual environments where students enjoy thinking and intense concentration and where limited curricula can be expanded by student initiated study; and colleges which have rearranged their calendars to accommodate and encourage independent study.[16] On another front, intensive courses and independent study are techniques used by External Degree, Open University, and Continuing Education programs to enlarge their pools of prospective students.

According to Hefferlin, at least 80 percent of all students surveyed have endorsed independent study of the intensive type.[17] This finding is directly opposed to the apathy and disinterest shown concurrent independent study, but this seems to be caused mainly by "red tape," archaic procedures, and the competing pressures of other courses.[18] Programs of intensive courses seem to be better organized and more attractive.

In most cases, credit is assumed for independent study pursued during a regular term. Most colleges also give credit for interim term programs, although a few are voluntary. Nearly 40 percent of Bucknell University

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students participate in its voluntary January plan.[19] In most cases where credit is not actually given, participation counts toward a graduation requirement.

The transfer of independent study credit is often more difficult than is the transfer of traditional credit because most institutions hesitate to recognize independent study which occurs outside their own scrutiny.[20] The guide of the national registrar's association recommends that the descriptive titles of all courses be entered on transcripts, but general practice is that "Dir Read" for Directed Reading or "Ind Stud" for Independent Study will appear rather than a title such as "Local Trans Problems," with the course number indicating that this was an independent study course.[21] Grades are usually of the Pass-Fail variety, although some colleges give grades with finer distinctions.

Standards are a bugaboo, a constant source of concern. Some faculty and administrators consider field work and January plans to be unacademic; their features are viewed as more akin to the extracurriculum than to serious academic work, and therefore are considered to be below the standards of the institution. If one assumes that a detailed syllabus and a master-pupil relationship are required for learning to occur, then independent study will be considered second-class. However, numerous panels on higher education and many individual educators argue that independent study is a legitimate academic endeavor and that appropriate standards and methods do exist to evaluate both the proposals and the results of non-traditional learning activities. These problems are addressed in the recommendations that follow at the end of the paper.

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Attrition is a major issue in American higher education. This phenomenon affects independent study, too, although most evidence indicates that it is not students in interim term or other campus-based independent study programs who drop out, but students in correspondence and television courses.[22] However, red tape and lack of faculty concern can still students' motivation for independent study just as they can for these other activities.

Because administrators are generally so enthusiastic about independent study, one would think that reliable financial information is known. Unfortunately, this is not the case. Although most schools consider independent study to be costly, reliable cost figures are not available.[23] In a small sample cited by Thompson and Dressel, about 40 percent found no change in costs, while another 40 percent said they found increases in faculty salaries and laboratory equipment, library, and administrative costs.[24] For "Jan" plans, many schools charge room, board and tuition, while a few do not charge tuition on the basis that the costs involved are already covered.[25] During the regular term, unless they are counted as part of the normal teaching load, independent study courses will be part of an overload for which the teacher is probably not paid extra. If he is paid, it will be expensive for the budget; if he is not, it will be expensive, in terms of faculty support, for the program. Mayhew cites evidence that independent study programs can add 25 percent to the total instructional budget if new teachers must be hired.[26]

Not all subject matter benefits from independent study. Learning language skills usually requires other people; it is not normally an "independent"

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task. Some skills, however, such as Mathematics, are learned more easily with the benefit of programmed instruction and without other assistance. Mayhew states that there are no good criteria available for determining those fields for which independent study is most appropriate.[27] Others argue that sound judgments can be made about advanced-level independent reading and laboratory study, and field-work. As examples, consider the titles of these Jan plan projects completed last year at one medium-sized university:

- A study of the university's transportation system and suggestions for its improvement
- Instruction in a computing language
- Design of a reading aid for the blind
- A study of the concepts of mathematical modeling.[28]

The benefits of independent study sound quite impressive. However, the praise must be tempered by the knowledge that independent study programs have been inadequately evaluated.[29] Nonetheless, some benefits seem valid. It is claimed that independent study helps improve students' problem-solving skills, fosters self-discipline, and permits greater interaction between students and faculty. It provides the possibility of freedom from the pace and place restraints of the concurrent schedule and the home campus, and flexibility in matching the requirements of the subject, the style of the instructor, and the needs of the student. Other benefits depend upon the plan itself: increasing one's knowledge, developing a seriousness of purpose through commitment to a single project, and providing a broader context in which to view one's studies can each result.[30] And, of course, independent study permits the expansion of the curriculum.

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Some aspects are administrative in nature: scheduling, grading, sabbaticals, etc. are all affected by the intensive mode. The most important feature of this style may be that it offers a distinct and lively alternative to concurrent courses and their more stable, bureaucratic nature.[31]

There are some warnings that should be noted. Intensive courses can be tiring for faculty who are unfamiliar with the new teaching style and the increased workload that results from student enthusiasm. Also, useful results depend very much on the willingness of students and faculty to spend the time and effort necessary to achieve success.[32] Unless enough time is set aside, the three-credit hour, concurrent, independent study course will be squeezed out by the demands of regular courses.

On balance, independent study seems to be a worthwhile enterprise in both the intensive and concurrent modes. How, then, can the probability of its success be enhanced? Mayhew suggests several principles, some of which have been mentioned already. First, sufficient time must be available for the independent study to have an impact on the student. One month-long interim term in four years is probably not enough to permit students to realize the goals of independent study. However, connecting that experience to concurrent courses or independent study during the regular term would enhance the chances for success, just as a longer intensive period would. A large block of time is needed to accommodate false starts, reduce the distractions of other activities, and allow for the cumulative effect of independent work to take place. Second, independent study must be sufficiently integrated into the curriculum to reduce administrative barriers

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a[illegible] to provide status for the courses. Third, unless independent study is considered part of the teaching load and reward system, professors will probably not encourage and support it sufficiently. Fourth, the program of independent study must be consistent with other features of the curriculum and the interests of students and faculty. As a single panacea it is doomed to a short life. Finally, don't expect too much in terms of personal growth; expect only that which can be delivered.[33] Independent study should not be the cruise ship in students' search for self.

The several reviews I have cited each end on a disappointed note. The authors note the possibilities and expectations for independent study, but their conclusions are influenced by the realities of college curricula, faculty attitudes, and students' sense of academic adventure. I am more optimistic, especially for the January term plan that is tailor-made by a student and one or two faculty advisors who share an interest in the project. If the experience is tied to the curriculum - e.g. research on military justice by a student in political science who has taken courses in constitutional law and the American military system - so much the better. Students may not learn more of a given subject through independent study than in a regular course, and they may not master self-discipline and problem-solving techniques, but they will most likely find satisfaction and success in an alternative style of learning in an area of study of their own choosing and planning. And this is no small achievement.

My recommendations for independent study follow. First, the objectives for the study should be articulated and published in catalogs and on the forms to be used. These objectives should concern both the experience itself

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and the subject matter to be mastered. Independent study, especially of the intensive variety, offers the opportunity to include some practical, quasi-professional experience in a liberal arts curriculum and to free new opportunitites from the boundaries of time, location, and tradition. This flexibility is a necessary feature of modern education because it permits the matching of students' learning needs with the resources necessary to meet those needs.

Ideally, the independent study project should be a student's idea that has been refined and formulated by the student and a faculty adviser. During the process of review, questions about length of time, percentage of time, setting, supervision, subject matter, number of credits, and grading should be decided. Each independent study course should have its own name, and not be sentenced to the transcript as "Dir Stud." The University of Rochester has a very good system that allows students to create their own names for directed study courses. Supervision may be provided by professors or university-screened preceptors on site, or by faculty visits, or by regular reports between sponsors and students.

Evaluation involves a review of the study's objectives, which may be fulfilled by writing papers, making objects, or presenting live performances. Certification may result from the direct evaluation of a project or a review of subsequent examination results such as those provided by the College Level Examination Program.

Faculty sponsorship of independent study should be made known to department chairmen and deans, perhaps by sending them copies of study project application forms. Whenever possible, it should count as part of the teaching

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load, either on a one-for-one basis, i.e. one independent study course equals one regular course, or on a computed basis, e.g. three independent study courses equal one regular course. This kind of teaching should always be considered during promotion and salary discussions. Too often, independent study sponsorship is a forgotten part of a professor's workload.

Other policy questions include the place of independent study in the curriculum, the qualifications needed to participate, and the cost to the student. If independent study is seen as a luxury or as an adventure for superior students, then it will be available to a limited group. The more persuasive position states that it is an important form of teaching and learning that should be made available to the maximum number of students, although advanced students are likely to make more use of the opportunity. The proportion of a student's total work allowed to be taken in a non-traditional manner in a residential college should probably not exceed two semesters out of eight; the norm will be about one in eight.

The costs of independent study to students should depend upon the University resources required by the program. If a student is studying off-campus and is expected to consult with his teacher only occasionally, he should not be billed at the same rate as someone who sees the teacher weekly and utilizes campus facilities. Although there is another alternative, no consultations at all, only the submission of a final report, this option should not be made legitimate by creating a fee for it. Consultation on a regular basis during the term should be required. Therefore, I propose the establishment of three fee rates: one for both concurrent and intensive independent study on-campus; another for intensive study off-campus with frequent consultations with advisers; and a third for intensive study off-campus that requires little

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consultation and work with home campus advisers and facilities. Type one should be covered by regular tuition charges. Types two and three should be charged 75% and 35% of tuition respectively to compensate for their claims on staff and facilities. In practice, fees for the latter types vary greatly, from the very modest to full tuition charges. The proposed fees are more adequate and fair than these. By charging on a percentage basis, institutions may charge different amounts, but the relationship to regular tuition will be the same. The fees should be based on the proposed study and assessed at the beginning of the term in the normal way.

If tuition is $3,000, the price of intensive study off-campus with frequent consultation would be $2250. If tuition is $2,000, the price would be $1500. The charges for intensive study off-campus with little consultation and work with home campus advisers and facilities would be $1050 and $700 respectively. These figures are not based on a scientific study of educational costs, but on a sense of proportion and knowledge of the services rendered to review, process, and evaluate independent study.

Fees should be charged for independent study whether or not the student is paying fees elsewhere, although some argue that fees paid off-campus should affect the amount charged by the home campus. But fees should be based on home campus services, not on some other criteria. Also, students should be granted credit for approved independent work even if they are paid as interns for their study. There is no evidence that pay retards learning, and the income may be necessary. Additionally, students should be eligible for financial aid, with proper adjustments for income, during the period of independent work. Otherwise, independent study would not be available to all on an equal basis.

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Term-long intensive independent study programs require variable credit, and special course designations. The standard designations used by most academic departments for their three- and four-credit hour courses are not adequate to represent coherent, full-time, cross-discipline study. Without a college or school field work or independent study course number that can account for up to 16 credit hours per term, several department numbers will be needed instead of only several teachers and one agency authorized to consider such proposals. The transcript should note "College 700" at 16 credit hours, for example, not "Soc 399" four times at four credit hours each.

Independent study as I have discussed it is not in absentia study, which means that a student is registered at another school, or a Leave of Absence, which implies an inactive status. It is independent study, also known as field work, field study, directed research, an internship program; it involves an active status with connections to one's home campus; and students should be registered as such.

These study arrangements can be valuable educational opportunities for students. They are also a good means by which schools can involve alumni in educational affairs in addition to the more routine financial activities. People with connections in health professions, industry, or the performing arts, for example, can help set up off-campus study sites in these areas. Many colleges and independent secondary schools request alumni assistance in helping students accomplish field study and "Jan plan" objectives to the benefit of both students and alumni.

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Most professional jobs require people to utilize the skills of problem-solving and independent thought that are enhanced by college-level independent study. If this is true, and I think it is, we have an obligation to organize independent study opportunities for our students.

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FOOTNOTES

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7. Mary M. Thompson and Paul L. Dressel, "A Survey of Independent Study Practices," Educational Record, Volume 51 (Fall, 1970), pp. 393, 394.
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9. Thompson and Dressel, p. 394.
10. Mayhew, p. 30.
11. Thompson and Dressel, p. 394.
12. Ibid.
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16. Hefferlin, p. 3n; Mayhew, p. 39.

17. Hefferlin, p. 4.

18. Mayhew, p. 27; Thompson and Dressel, p. 394.

19. "Jan Plan," Bucknell Engineering News, Volume 1, Number 1 (March, 1972), pp. 1 and 3.

20. Sharon, p. 9; Arland F. Christ-Janer, "Credit by Examination," in The Expanded Campus, Dyckman W. Vermilye, editor (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1972), p. 162.

21. "A Guide to an Adequate Permanent Record and Transcript," American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers, 1971.

22. Sharon, p. 8; Dressel and Thompson.

23. Thompson and Dressel, p. 393.

24. Ibid.

25. Bucknell World (September 14, 1973), p. 7.

26. Mayhew, p. 29.

27. Ibid., p. 30.

28. "Jan Plan," p. 3.

29. Hefferlin, p. 4; Thompson and Dressel, p. 393.

30. Hefferlin, pp. 2.

31. Ibid.

32. Ibid., p. 2-4

33. Mayhew, p. 28n.